A welcome addition to the still scantly representation in American collections of early German paintings is the large altarpiece recently purchased for The Cloisters and here published for the first time.

This imposing work by an anonymous artist of the Middle Rhenish school, active in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, has had a singularly uneventful history. It was painted about 1470 for the chapel of a castle called Burg Weiler, which commands a tributary of the Neckar a few miles above Heilbronn in what is now Württemberg. It remained there, in the possession of the Barons von und zu Weiler, until less than twenty years ago when it entered the collection of a Ruhr industrialist. It has therefore had only two owners during nearly five hundred years and has come down to us in an unusually intact and fresh condition, its brilliant colors unfaded.

This placid descent is somewhat remarkable, for the vicinity has had an occasionally tumultuous history. Many near-by castles—among them Weibertreu only a mile or so away—were turned into picturesque ruins by the Peasants' War of 1525, others during the campaigns of Gustavus Adolphus and Louis XIV and the final push of the American Army in 1945; and having Götz von Berlichingen as a neighbor was a distinct hazard. Nevertheless, Burg Weiler and its altarpiece survived all these dangers; the rebuilding of the castle in 1590 was apparently undertaken for reasons of comfort rather than of necessity.

Despite the intense preoccupation of German art historians during the past generation with the Gothic art of their own country, this altarpiece has very nearly escaped their attention and is so far without an attribution. It is understood that Dr. Ernst Buchner has located several other pictures which can be attributed to the same hand and which, in honor of the most recent owner, he proposed to group under the name of the Master of the Lüps Altarpiece. It seems to us more appropriate to retain the geographically significant place of origin in his title and to call this anonymous artist the Master of the Burg Weiler Altarpiece.

The situation of the castle may give us a clue toward ultimate identification of the artist, for it lies almost at the junction of two routes very important in medieval times. The main road from the Rhine to Franconian and imperial Nuremberg passed its walls, and the principal route from Cologne and the Lowlands to Ulm at this point followed the Neckar through the salt and market town of Heilbronn. Several important monasteries are in the vicinity, notably Wimpfen (dating from Carolingian times) and Maulbronn, while Tiefenbronn is not very far away. From early times the region, with its steep hillsides rising sunnily above the river, has also been given to the growing of grapes and the pressing of a pleasant green-gold wine.

The imposing altarpiece, which at first sight seems so bland and impersonal, may contain further clues of interest. What we see when the triptych is open is a long row of saints, grave of mien and rather sumptuous in costume, ranged on either side of the Virgin and Child. The central group is unified horizontally by a pair of floating angels who hold a crown over the Virgin's head; the pairs of saints on the wings survived all these dangers; the rebuilding of the castle in 1590 was apparently undertaken for reasons of comfort rather than of necessity.

Unity is given the whole by the elaborate canopy of carved and gilded leaves, flowers, and branches in high relief, the branches twining into repeated shapes of hearts and caducei rising from tiny foliated corbels. Further, subtler unity is provided by the continuous background of gold incised in a bold, brocade-like pattern, which is interrupted at intervals by the solid halos, and by the dais-like floor laid in blocks of colored tile. Each panel is contained within the simple, flat frame characteristic of the period, painted dull red and decorated with conventional flowers.
The Virgin and Child with Eight Saints, an altarpiece from Burg Weiler by an unknown painter of the Middle Rhine, about 1470. Oil and tempera on wood. Height 68\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches; width of center panel 60 inches, each wing 26 inches. At The Cloisters
The reverse of the altarpiece wings. Left, three martyrs of the Theban Legion. Right, Saint Theodulus holding a model of the abbey of Saint Maurice, which he built in the VI century over the relics of the martyrs.
When the altarpiece is closed a less serene, indeed a gory spectacle meets our eyes, for here the left wing shows three young men impaled on the vicious thorns of a tree. They are observed from the right wing by a bishop saint carrying the model of a church. Both scenes, unlike those on the main face of the altarpiece, take place in landscapes enriched in the foreground with grasses and other recognizable plants, while in the background are highly abstracted forms representing mountains. The canopied ornament, unlike that within the altarpiece, is simulated rather than carved. Who these saints are we shall inquire a little later, for meanwhile we have noticed that the personages attending the Virgin are fully identified.

Or are they? Below each figure is a name incised into the riser of the dais. They are cleanly carved and, despite the occasional abbreviations, reversed N’s, and mixed capital and minuscule letters, seem quite legible. They read from left to right: S Ios, S Wendel, S Apolonia, S Barbara, S Maria, S Katerina, S Lorencivs, S Sebastevnvs, and S Horicivs. One or two of these names may trouble us, but most are easily penetrated, although Ios, Wendel, and Horicius hardly sound familiar. One suspects that the lettering was done by a doubly anonymous assistant to our anonymous painter, and that the helper was an unlettered lad who was not a very accurate copyist.

The figures in the group surrounding the Virgin are all familiar, one might say standard, saints—Apollonia, Barbara, Catherine, and Lawrence—so they will give us no trouble. The altarpiece was delivered to us with the warrior saint at the extreme right identified as “Horace”: there is no such saint in the calendar, the Horatius episode at the bridge having occurred far too early for that doughty warrior to have enjoyed the advantages of Christianity. For the initial H we should read M, as the armored standard-bearer is obviously Saint Maurice, and this identification ties in, as we shall see, with the episode on the reverse of the other wing. We find him, as a matter of fact, depicted in very similar fashion, including the banner, in the famous altarpiece of Stefan Lochner in Cologne cathedral; later artists tended to represent him as a Negroid “Moor” (for example, Grünewald’s painting of 1525, now in Munich), alluding to his presumed birthplace in Upper Egypt or punning on his name. (This characterization also occasionally appears very much earlier, as in the sculpture of about 1240 in Bamberg cathedral.) Despite the illiterate orthography, Maurice’s companion, unfamiliarly dressed in the fur-lined robe and cap of a nobleman and wearing a beard, is nonetheless that even more familiar, not to say ubiquitous, soldier saint, Sebastian. He carries the bow and arrows of his martyrdom to prove it, though it is rare to find him dressed as late as the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The bearded maturity, however uncommon
in Italian or Flemish art, is frequent in the German conception of Sebastian well into the following century.

The pilgrim saints in the opposite panel are less easy to identify, at least in the case of “Ios.” Wendel, or Wendelinus as he is more generally called in Germany, was the heir to an Irish king who renounced his rights to succession, made a pilgrimage to Rome, spent a period as a hermit in the neighborhood of what is now St. Wendel in the present-day Saarland, passed another period as cowherd to a nobleman, and finally, still in the same district, became Abbot of Tholey, where he died in 617. A cult in his honor was established during the late fifteenth century in Germany and was particularly popular in Franconia. His primary duty was to intercede for the welfare of cattle, a matter of great importance in rural areas and of real concern at the castle of the Weilers, where there must have been not only horses and cows but also teams of creamy oxen to haul grapes and hay. Furthermore, the Weiler family was believed to have had its origin in the same neighborhood where the saint was buried. He had an added attraction in embodying that favorite subject of German poetry, the disguised Königsohn. He is shown in our picture as the most youthful of the male saints. He wears a relatively humble costume and holds a gnarled and twisted staff suitable for a stalwart cowherd, but there is reference to his royal origin not only in the refined cut of his features and delicately shaped hands but also and most specifically in the elegant little dog looking alertly toward the Virgin from behind his robes. This is no uncouth farmer’s hound but a court pet with a fragile collar of spiked rings meant for ornament, not for aiding a fight with a wild boar.

The identification of “Ios” is by no means so easy. He is clearly not Joseph, who is never depicted as a pilgrim and could not be separated so far from the Virgin. There has been speculation that he might represent Saint Justus, but that unfortunate, if stalwart, Christian, uncommon in any case in German art, was martyred by beheading at the age of nine and is customarily shown as a child carrying his head under his arm in the fashion of Saint Denis. It is a temptation because of the pilgrim staff and emblem on the hat to accept him as Saint James, but the emblem itself appears to be a figure of Saint James in a miniature shrine rather than the typical cockleshell he usually wears, and it would hardly seem possible for even a careless apprentice to copy the German abbreviation Jac or Jak for Jakobus as Ios.

Preoccupation with the possibilities of trilingual transliterations (Latin to French to German and back again) and the inescapable pilgrim’s emblems plus the pairing of a pilgrim saint with Wendelinus to balance the two warrior saints of the right wing leads us to the correct answer. This regal pilgrim with his custom-made staff can only be Saint Jodokus, son of a Celtic ruler of Brittany, hermit and pilgrim, who was a near contemporary of Wendelinus. Known in France as Josse, in Trier and the Middle Rhine as Jost, and elsewhere in Germany as Jodok or Jodokus, it is easy to see how the letterer who made such a botch of Sebastian came out with Ios instead of Iod. We find very similar representations of him with an identical staff and badge in a fresco dated 1476 in the Kornelikirche at near-by Wimpfen and with the same staff but shorter robes in a fresco of about 1470 at Saint Goar.

Jodokus, whose name is not apt to sound familiar in this country, was immensely important in medieval Germany. He to some extent even displaced Saint James as the principal patron of pilgrims in an age when, as everyone will recall from Tannhäuser, the Germans were singularly addicted to penitential pilgrimage. This aspect was less vital by the time the Burg Weiler altarpiece was painted. His cult, which extends in Germany back to the ninth century, had by this time partially transformed him into a specially potent protector of cattle, a power he shares with Wendelinus. Countryfolk also considered him efficacious for a variety of potential disasters and dangers such as the destruction of house and barn by fire, storms and hidden currents while crossing lakes, and damage to crops and person from lightning and hail. His intercession was likewise sought to procure the ripening of crops, and he became the patron of wine cellars. It is easy to see why he should
Saint Jodokus, with a pilgrim's staff and the badge of Saint James on his hat, and the Virgin and Child, details from the left wing and center panel.
assume a prominent place in the altarpiece of an isolated, prosperous castle.

The attributes and duties of the principals in the main panel are mostly, but not entirely, orthodox. Apollonia, patroness of toothache, is characteristically shown holding an oversized molar in a pair of immense tongs. Barbara, in place of the more familiar tower, which by this time was by association beginning to make of her a patroness of defense, particularly for the pioneer artillerymen, is shown holding the chalice and host which identify her as the patroness of those desiring to die in blessedness. In her left hand she holds a carnation, or pink, uncommon as a saintly attribute but a familiar medieval symbol of chastity. It is here the antithesis of the pink with its implication of fulfillment, which we see in so many fifteenth-century betrothal portraits of the Netherlandish and German schools; for Barbara’s confinement in the tower of literal inviolability was originally imposed by her jealous father precisely to forestall even visual profanation of her beauty. The espousal of Christianity, which led to her death, resulted from meditations in the tower.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria, patroness of philosophers, stands in traditional pose, holding the sword, on a segment of the knife-bladed wheel of her martyrdom, her gaze fixed on the averted face of the Christ Child, a circumstance which is rare but serves to establish almost the only dramatic tension in the main panel of the altarpiece. Because of the wheel, and the lack of philosophers in the country, she had by this time in Germany also become the patroness of millers and wagon-makers. She wears the crown of martyrdom, like Apollonia and Barbara. All four holy ladies are dressed in the height of current German fashion, as may be seen by comparison with woodcuts in the edition of Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* published at Ulm by Johann Zainer in 1473.

Saint Lawrence, tonsured, in diaconal vestments of considerable splendor, and holding a book (the Gospels), is dangling a token griddle rather casually on his index finger, its solid weight resting at one corner on the dais. His principal duty in the country was to inspire thoughts of Christian charity.

The Virgin, protected at her feet by the sickle moon of chastity, stands under the crown of the Queen of Heaven suspended over her head by the fingertips of a pair of enchanting angels. Her head inclines thoughtfully to the right while her long-fingered hands effortlessly support the infant Christ. This chubby, abstracted child turns in the opposite direction, pulling out the end of the scarf about his loins, thus providing the only movement in the altarpiece, for even the floating angels are motionless. Their wings, although fancifully colored, are very closely observed from nature (a heron, probably) and are quite sufficiently substantial to support them in flight.

The bishop saint on the reverse of the right wing poses another problem of identification; the apparent lettering on the hem of his cope is unhelpful gibberish, and the only obvious clue is the church model he supports on his right hand and forearm. There are over thirty bishop saints customarily portrayed this way in German art, known by the models they hold as founders of churches or monasteries, but the models rarely are sufficiently accurate to permit exact identification. Most of the candidates can be eliminated for one reason or another; the two who seemed most likely to appear at Burg Weiler are Saint Adelphus, a bishop of Metz at the turn of the fourth century whose wonder-working relics have since 836 made the abbey of Neuweiler in Alsace a place of pilgrimage, and Saint Gumpertus, who was active in Franconia during the reign of Charlemagne. I inclined to the notion that a real or fancied family connection of the Weilers with Neuweiler would more satisfactorily explain the presence of Saint Adelphus in the altarpiece of the family chapel. However, the connection must be sought in the altarpiece itself, and by good luck the conclusive answer appeared when I ran across a sculpture of a figure who had somehow escaped listing as a model-carrying bishop in the various indices of saintly attributes: Saint Theodulus. He it was who, after attending a synod in 519 at Agaunum, the site of the massacre of the Theban Legion, searched out the relics of the martyrs and built over their bones the abbey of Saint Maurice.
The episode of the Theban Legion on the reverse of the other wing, sanguinary though it be, is fascinating in itself and challenged nearly every important artist in both the German and Swiss Rhinelands, for the survivors of that holocaust, notably Saint Gereon of Cologne and Saint Victor of Xanten who were fortunately absent on special detail, are venerated as the bringers of Christianity to this storied region. It is often confused with a medieval legend of the martyrdom of the ten thousand on Mount Ararat, which formed a celebrated subject for Dürer. The Theban Legion, so called because raised at Thebes in Egypt, had been dispatched into Gaul under the leadership of Maurice by the emperor Maximinianus Herculius at the end of the third century. While encamped in the Alps near the headwaters of the Isère at Agaunum, the Legion was ordered in 302 to observe certain pagan rites of the season but refused because it was composed exclusively of Christians. The Roman authorities in the face of stubborn resistance attempted to compel compliance by decimating the Legion, but the heroic believers only stiffened in their resolution. Finally the entire Legion, including its leaders Maurice, Exuperius, and Candidus, was put to death either by impaling the men on sharpened trees or by pushing them over the cliffs.

Subsequently, many of their relics were car-
ried into the Rhineland, where Gereon and other survivors had already been successful missionaries, and became objects of veneration in numerous churches and monasteries dedicated to their memory. Thus these archetypes of the muscular Christian in time came to form the perfect counterpart to that other great Rhenish legend of Christian faith, the story of Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins. The discretion of our anonymous artist in representing the tragedy of the Theban Legion by only three of its number is noteworthy, as is the advanced understanding of anatomy demonstrated in the drawing of these contorted bodies.

The question of the authorship of our altarpiece remains obscure. The high technical competence of the artist is counterbalanced by a certain weakness of invention, which accounts for the monotonous repetition of faces and gestures. He is an accomplished mannerist rather than an inventor, a man who has absorbed much knowledge from the great Netherlandish school, probably by way of Colmar and Caspar Isenmann, and has yet retained the peculiarities of the local Rhenish-Franconian style. He is a trifle in advance of the final flowering of Gothic baroque painting, clearly announcing such artists as the Master of the Bartholomew Altar, with whom he shares a conspicuous love and talent for the rendering of richly brocaded stuffs. His lack of interest in landscape, combined with the realistic detail of individual plants and flowers on the back of the altarpiece wings, is a specific characteristic which cannot be associated with any known master. He has much in common with Friedrich Herlin, whose types are very similar but less refined and elegant; and with the even coarser Hans Schüchlin; and he strongly predicts Bartholomäus Zeitblom in the next generation; yet he does not seem to have been trained in Ulm, and his character is more of the Middle Rhine than Swabian. The anonymous author of the Stetten Altarpiece in Stuttgart is also closely related. An altarpiece, now dispersed, of which one wing still remains in the monastery of Lichtenthal near Baden-Baden, appears to be by our painter, who was tentatively listed by Werner Deusch simply as an “Upper Rhine master active about 1470” (Deutsche Malerei des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts, Berlin, 1936, p. 26). Here the matter must rest for the present, but the Cloisters acquisition provides a solid framework about which to assemble the work of, and perhaps ultimately to identify, the Master of the Burg Weiler Altarpiece.

One of the angels supporting the crown of the Queen of Heaven, detail from the center panel